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ABSTRACT

Reports of declining test scores and high school graduates who can't read or compute have triggered a public demand for higher standards in education. In light of this demand, National Assessment re-examined its role with respect to raising educational quality in this country. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) asked seven educators to answer questions about NAEP's appropirate role regarding standards. (1) To what extent is there a desire to establish and raise standards in the United States? (2) What is the nature of the desire? (3) How are standards of educational achievement raised beyond that of minimum proficiency? (4) What roles should NAEP play in developing or setting educational standards at the national, state, and local levels? (5) What process should NAEP use to assure that elements important to particular learning areas be included? (6) What ways of organizing/structuring objectives would help facilitate raising educational standards? Their responses, synthesized in this paper, shed light on the nature of the public's desire for standards and on steps various communities are taking and provide recommendations on the part that the National Assessment should play. Primary types of information provided by report: Program Description (Program Goals). (Author/PN)

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Introduction

During 1981, an evaluation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was carried out by Willard Wirtz and Archie E. Lapointe under funding from the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.[1] The investigation, undertaken at the request of the Assessment Policy Committee (APC), NAEP's governing body, recommended that National Assessment play a more aggressive role in promoting higher education standards.

As part of its response to this investigation, the Assessment Policy Committee commissioned papers from seven educators. These papers were in the form of responses to six questions that focused on the part NAEP should take with respect to the issue of raising education standards.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Assessment Policy Committee extend their thanks to the following individuals for their thoughtful, well-considered responses to the questions posed:

Dr. Paul Collins, Principal, Amherst Middle School, Amherst, New Hampshire

Dr. O.L. Davis, Jr., Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Texas, Austin, Texas

Dr. Calvin M. Frazier, Commissioner of Education, Colorado State Department of Education, Denver, Colorado

Dr. Harold Hodgkinson, President, NTL Institute, Arlington, Virginia

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[1] Willard Wirtz and Archie E. Lapointe, Measuring the Quality of Education: A Report on Assessing Educational Progress, Washington, D.C.: Wirtz and Lapointe, 1982.

Dr. Freda Holley, Director, Office of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District, Austin, Texas

Dr. Warren McGregor, Principal, Manhasset Junior-Senior High School, Manhasset, New York

Dr. James Schott, District Superintendent, Orange County Schools, Orlando, Florida.

This paper summarizes major points made by the seven authors. Copies of their complete responses are available on request from National Assessment.

The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not necessarily represent the institutions with which they are affiliated. Similarly, the views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Education Commission of the States or the National Institute of Education.

Summary

Although specific recommendations varied, a number of general themes occurred in the responses to the six questions. Major points of concurrence are described below, followed by summaries of responses to each of the questions.

1. The educators agreed that there is a generalized desire for "higher standards" in education in the nation. This does not necessarily translate into a desire for higher minimum standards, but is more of a felt need for higher "quality" in education.

2. There has been a tremendous increase in access to education during the past three decades. In calling for higher standards, one must keep in mind that the goals of universal access to education and excellence in academic pursuits may not always be completely compatible.

3. To raise standards, programs must be based on the concept of higher expectations, not on minimum acceptable levels. Local district involvement is critical to any program intended to raise educational quality.

4. NAEP should not play a role in "setting" education standards. Authors indicated that the Assessment should continue to act as an indicator of national performance and should stand ready to provide assistance in developing standards or goals if asked. However, National Assessment should use more powerful publicity strategies than presently employed to ensure that its information is widely disseminated.

5. The educators emphasized the need for greater liaison between National Assessment and national, state and local education agencies. Several advocated cooperative assessment ventures; others recommended increased technical assistance or improved systems for exchanging information.

6. Educators were divided on the value of national level objectives in relation to education standards. Several felt strongly that objectives are only meaningful when developed in the context of other instructional activities. Others saw value in National Assessment objectives as a model or resource document.

Responses to the Six Questions

Following are summaries of answers given to the six questions.

Question 1. To what extent is there a desire to establish and raise educational standards in the United States? (How widespread is the desire?)

The educators agreed that there is a general, if not well-articulated, desire for higher education quality across the country. One author felt that interest in standards and education is not particularly widespread, citing limited involvement of parents in school programs and low turnouts in school elections. However, most were of the opinion that there is an interest on the part of the public in raising education standards. As one author put it, "Support for higher standards taps a rich reservoir of cultural sentiment favoring progress and increased levels of attainment."

Negative media reports on the schools and reported declines in test scores have acted to spur the quest for higher standards. Federal initiatives in education, often seen as the remedy for inadequacies of state and local agencies, as well as the often abrasive tactics used in collective bargaining may have contributed to a distrust of local school officials.

The papers caution against taking the call for standards too literally, as a mandate for articulated, specific national standards. One author commented, "Their (the public's) concept of standards, moreover, must be understood to consist of even higher expectations -- or in a dated phrase, quality -- not the standards defined by capricious and arbitrary points on a psychometric scale." However, another did view parents' goals as more narrowly targeted, focusing mainly on raising scores on nationally publicized standardized tests.

Central to the discussion of higher standards must be the balancing of the goal of educational access for all and the desire for higher standards. As one paper commented, "With few exceptions, yesterday's schools served only the most able learners. Today's schools, however, are serving nearly every child regardless of capacity." Though minimum competency testing has been regarded as a way to assure that a certain lower level of achievement is attained, such tests do not address the question of goals for abler students.

In effect, these authors appear to conclude, the idea of one "higher standard" for everyone is unrealistic and not really what the public wants. As one paper noted, each child does not start from the same place. Thus, progress can only be measured in terms of progress of the individual, not in terms of some universal standard to be achieved.

Question 2. What is the nature of the desire? (1) Who wants educational standards: parents, students, teachers, school administrators, politicians, the business community, the public? and (2) What exactly is it they want?

Just about everyone, at least in some sense, wants higher educational standards, although in each group mentioned above, undoubtedly only a small percentage is vitally concerned with the issue. Americans view education as a valuable commodity, one that should not be trivialized by lowered standards.

One author felt that the public is much more concerned with the issue of standards than are educators, saying that educators become "defensive" when confronted with standards. Another felt strongly that parents are at the head of any list of those desiring improved educational standards.

The desire to raise standards is a desire to improve quality, not to set minimums. The greatest value in the minimums set by legislatures is their symbolic value, said one author. While these minimums are seen only as an adequate and not as a desired state, they do serve to focus attention on what has been perceived as a problem.

Though many groups want standards imposed, "each of these groups also want the standards to be imposed to infringe little if at all upon their areas of independence." Thus, parents want higher standards but are reluctant to have their own children

failed; teachers want higher standards for grades below them but most don't want their own classes monitored; and taxpayers may not be ready to shoulder the expensive burden of remediation. Interestingly enough, while polls show Americans uneasy about the state of public education in general, most are satisfied with their own local schools.

It is important to remember, one author noted, that what a standard is or should be varies considerably in the eye of the beholder. Thus, a single answer to the question of what people want when they ask for standards is not a realistic expectation.

Question 3. How do you go about raising the expected and actual standards of educational achievement in your school/district/state beyond that of minimum proficiency?

Involvement of local district personnel and the community in the development of standards-raising activities and a refusal to settle for "minimums" as a goal to be reached are critical in any effort to raise standards. Said one author, "Any serious moves to raise expected and actual standards of educational achievement cannot be based on ideas of minimums."

To move beyond minimums, educational leadership must establish a climate of high performance and high expectations and point the way toward excellence. According to one author, school boards,

superintendents and principals must "carry the achievement banner high." He added that raising education standards is essentially a leadership function. Another stressed that parental involvment, carefully planned, is a must in upping standards.

Another author pointed out that "neither teachers nor students are likely to take action as a result of standards unless they themselves are measured against those standards." Although assessments of a sample of students may be meaningful from a statistical point of view, people often are not inspired to improve unless they are directly involved in the process.

The educators stressed the need for local involvement in the goal setting and evaluation process. One said, "Educational history is littered with the residue of top-down proclamations that asserted but could not effect change." He recommended that the school should be the working unit in attempts to raise standards. Also emphasized was the need for involvement of the entire community, not just educators, in the process.

Looking at specific programs, in Florida, minimum competencies are set by the state. However, these are only "building blocks" to be used in defining and pursuing higher expectations. Districts and individual schools can also set their own goals, over and above the state minimums, and evaluate progress toward those goals.

In Colorado, local districts are expected to set goals, monitor progress toward them and then report results to the public. The state checks that the process is being carried out, but local

districts are responsible for setting their own goals and determining the educational needs of the community.

In New York, students identified as slow learners must pass competency examinations to graduate; others must pass the well-known regents examinations. To foster higher standards, teachers should be involved in curriculum development and given time to share experiences. Building rapport with staff and parents is also critical in raising standards.

Question 4. What roles should National Assessment play in developing or setting educational standards at the national, state and local levels? What are the pros and cons of each?

There was a fairly strong consensus that National Assessment should not "set" education standards. But the respondents were not unanimous on what NAEP's role with regard to standards should be.

Several recommended that National Assessment continue to do what it does now -- act as a barometer to spotlight strengths and weaknesses in the nation's educational accomplishments and perhaps indicate areas of national need. Others felt NAEP might consider a more active stance, publicizing its information with a view to stirring people to action. Also suggested was that National Assessment could help others develop standards -- perhaps

by continuing to provide resource materials or by offering additional technical assistance to state and local agencies.

Several authors felt that NAEP should undertake more cooperative ventures with state and local agencies. One suggested that NAEP do more contracting with such agencies for various aspects of assessment, perhaps under some type of chargeback arrangement. Elaborating on this theme, he said that National Assessment should become at least 50 percent in-kind self-supporting through shared activities with states and local districts. Another recommended that state agencies should be able to link with National Assessment to conduct assessments.

Following are some specific suggestions for expanding NAEP's present role:

- o National education associations might be encouraged to disseminate NAEP data through their publications. Stronger links should be forged between National Assessment and the various national education organizations.
- o NAEP might develop model standards, which state and local agencies could then use in constructing their own standards. Care would be needed so that the models were not seen or used as national standards.
- o It might now be politically acceptable to develop a national set of standards and items that could be used by districts on a voluntary basis. Since this development could entail competing with commerical firms, new legislation might be necessary for NAEP to assume this role.

- The Large City Directors of Research and Evaluation are working on a policy whereby firms would have to meet certain standards before districts would participate in norming studies. NAEP might administer such a policy in the role of "norming coordinator." This might mean working with districts to secure norming samples or actually contracting with firms to conduct the norming studies.
- NAEP might also serve as a facilitator to develop a coordinated strategy for nationwide use of educational data. To do this, NAEP should develop a multi-year assessment plan and establish a structure to coordinate its activities with other federal agencies, such as regional offices, regional labs and research centers. NAEP could then help the states in carrying out their responsibilities for education as well as perhaps triggering federal involvement in areas seen as appropriate for federal concern.

Question 5. What process would you suggest NAEP use to assure that all elements important in improving education in particular learning areas are included?

This question was interpreted in different ways. Several respondents commented that the question frames an impossible goal, since National Assessment has no ability to assure that needed

funding levels, teachers, programs or materials are available to the schools.

One author felt that National Assessment might provide a needed service by investigating areas in which research is not currently being concentrated, such as computer literacy. National Assessment might also cooperate with firms involved in developing educational software.

Several writers urged that National Assessment intensify efforts to link with state and local education agencies. Suggested were cooperative objective and item development efforts and establishment of a consulting and service facility. Another suggested that this cooperation might be facilitated by working through Chief State School Officers. NAEP might also set up an "advising, consulting, testing bureau" to work with states and a portion of each state's educational budget might support the National Assessment, in an arrangement similar to that used by the Education Commission of the States.

According to one author, in addition to increased cooperation with state and local agencies, NAEP should also have a process for structured interaction with national leadership. Various educational agencies and research centers might work together in establishing the type of input that NAEP should contribute to national policy making. Organizations other than government, such as business leaders and the military, should be encouraged to make use of National Assessment materials and data.

Looking at the question from a different angle, another author felt that NAEP should continue to use its present procedures for objective and item development, making sure that representation in the consensus process is broadly based. This author felt that National Assessment might engage in developing model standards. As part of this process, the project might identify successful schools and include elements of their standards in the overall standards development process.

Question 6. What ways of organizing/structuring objectives would help facilitate raising educational standards?

Several respondents believed that objectives, by themselves, are not particularly useful in raising educational standards. One respondent noted that setting of detailed objectives has all too frequently led to trivialization of the curriculum and frustration on the part of teachers.

Another felt that it is not profitable to develop and organize objectives in a vacuum apart from other instructional activities. NAEP could provide consulting assistance to school districts in developing objectives and facilitate the exchange of information among different groups. However, this respondent did not think that NAEP should devote its energies to raising standards through objectives.

One author advocated moving away from structured objectives altogether, perhaps shifting to the development of large item banks addressing a multiplicity of instructional goals or objectives. If objectives and items existed in abundance, teachers could pick and chose among them according to the needs of their programs and would not need to worry about hierarchical structures.

Other authors were somewhat more positive on the role of objectives although agreeing that objectives alone, no matter how they are structured, will not raise standards. Another suggestion was that needs assessment techniques might be used in determining objectives. Objectives could focus on topics about which information is needed rather than simply covering the range of a subject area.

National Assessment might also set terminal performance objectives in various curricular levels at various difficulty levels. Item response theory could be used to show how items relate to each other. To measure change, NAEP should maintain certain "critical" objectives and adapt the others as conditions dictate.

One author also offered general directions, not specific to objectives, that the project might take to make its findings more useful. Among his suggestions:

1. Assess all content areas related to the mission of the school -- continue to measure curriculum areas that are often ignored.
2. Use five general subject areas and assess those areas once every five years.

3. Assess students at grade levels and perhaps include more levels than currently assessed.
4. Collect information related to achievement, such as information on students' background and school experiences.
5. Report results and encourage states and locals to determine what constitutes an acceptable level of performance for them.

References

Wirtz, Willard and Lapointe, Archie, E. Measuring the Quality of Education: A Report on Assessing Educational Progress, Washington, D.C.: Wirtz and Lapointe, 1982.